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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 KYIV 001433

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SUBJECT: UKRAINE - RUSSIA: RELATIVE CALM PREVAILS

REF: KYIV 1322

#### Summary

1. (C) Ukrainian President Yushchenko's calm response to complaints conveyed in an August 10 letter from Russian President Medvedev (ref) has been met by general approval in Ukraine. Prime Minister Yuliya Tymoshenko's eventual response was also measured in tone, and echoed Yushchenko in strongly defending Ukraine's sovereign rights. Since then, bilateral contacts have quietly continued, including a meeting of the Acting Minister of Defense with his Russian counterpart on August 18 and a Tymoshenko-Putin phone call on August 19 to discuss economic cooperation and a possible early September meeting in Poland, at the invitation of Polish President Donald Tusk. End Summary.

#### Yushchenko's Reply

2. (C) Those hoping for an emotional diatribe from Yushchenko were disappointed by his eventual reaction, conveyed in a written response to Medvedev three days later, on August 13. His calm, reasonable response underscored Ukraine's sovereign right to determine its own alliances, as well as its own internal and foreign policies. The letter chastised Medvedev as unconstructive, particularly in his decision not to send an Ambassador to Kyiv. Ukrainian reaction to Yushchenko's letter has ranged from overall satisfaction with the tone to mild dissatisfaction with its failure to offer proactive suggestions on how relations could be improved.

#### Tymoshenko

3. (C) While most other Ukrainian politicians reacted to Medvedev's incoming letter by quickly distancing themselves from Yushchenko (ref), Prime Minister Tymoshenko's statement, released on August 14, echoed Yushchenko's. Rather than blame the President for problems with Russia or distancing herself from his policies, Tymoshenko noted that she, as Prime Minister, also tries to contribute to strong bilateral relations. In strong terms, she defended Ukraine's right to "independently, without external interference, define its external and internal policy." Her statement concludes with a dig at Medvedev's unwillingness to work with Ukraine's current leadership: "Any pause in the development of cooperation between Ukraine and Russia is unacceptable."

#### Lytvyn the Conciliator?

4. (C) Presidential candidates Yanukovich -- widely perceived to have done himself some discredit by a hasty embrace of the Medvedev letter -- and Yatsenyuk have not commented further after their initial criticism of the current bad state of relations. By contrast, Rada Speaker Lytvyn has continued to press forward with his style of parliamentary diplomacy, pushing hard for a meeting of the Ukraine-Russia Inter-Parliamentary Commission in early September.

15. (C) In an interview with Ekho Moskvyy radio on August 18, Lytvyn took pains to reach out to the Russian audience, agreeing that relations cannot improve if foreign policy is determined by the President of Ukraine (note: according to the Ukrainian constitution, this is the case). Lytvyn stated that Ukraine should not focus on "controversial moments" in its shared history with Russia, that Ukraine should remain in the CIS, that Russia has a special leadership role in the CIS, that the new law authorizing the Russian president to use force to protect Russian citizens abroad may not be "a priori" aggressive, that arms sales to Georgia should be reexamined, and that he does not see direct Russian influence in Ukrainian electoral politics.

#### Public Opinion

16. (C) Ukrainian think tank Razumkov Center conducted a telephone poll of at least 600 people each in the cities of Kyiv, Lviv, Mykolaiv, Donetsk, and Simferopol between September 12 and 16. Respondents were asked whether they were aware of Medvedev's address to Yushchenko, whether they supported Medvedev's claims, what they thought of Medvedev's decision to delay the dispatch of a new ambassador to Kyiv, whether Medvedev was disrespectful to Yushchenko or to Ukraine on the whole (or both), whether Medvedev's motive was to interfere with elections, and whether Russia currently represents a threat to Ukraine.

17. (C) Results of the polling revealed a predictable geographic split in people's views, with most in the West and in Kyiv reacting negatively to the letter and ascribing

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negative motives to Medvedev. With regard to the potential threat posed to Ukraine by Russia, most respondents did not perceive a threat (with the exception of Lviv, where the split was slightly skewed toward seeing a threat). Most interesting of all, however, was the high percentage of respondents who said they were unaware of Medvedev's letter in the first place.

#### Comment

18. (C) The letter from Medvedev seems to have been perceived by many Ukrainians as an emotional statement of well-known differences. Ukrainians by and large do not seem to view Russia as an existential threat. While many were not pleased with the emotional tone taken in Medvedev's message, Ukrainians may be currently more absorbed with Ukraine's own internal problems and the upcoming elections than with problems in the bilateral relationship with Russia. Tymoshenko's balanced response to Medvedev is likely to play well both with her traditional electoral base in the West, and with potential voters in the East, who look forward to a new pragmatic approach that would do less to irritate Moscow. PETTIT